

A 'Green New Deal' Is Far From Reality, but Climate Action Is Picking Up in the States

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Highlight: The midterm elections brought in a new wave of governors with aggressive plans to cut emissions and expand low-carbon energy. Now, those plans are being implemented.

Body

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WASHINGTON — Even though talk of a “Green New Deal” is getting louder in Congress, the odds of major federal climate legislation passing in the next two years remain extremely low.

It’s a different story at the state level, however: The midterm elections in the fall brought in a new wave of governors who are now setting climate goals for their states and laying out more ambitious plans to cut emissions and expand low-carbon energy.

In the past month, newly elected Democratic governors in Michigan, Illinois and New Mexico have joined the United States Climate Alliance, a group of 19 states and Puerto Rico that has vowed to uphold the Paris climate agreement despite President Trump’s disavowal of the accord. With the new additions, the alliance now covers one-third of America’s greenhouse gas emissions and nearly half its population.

“It essentially says to the world that Michigan is going to live up to the promise that we, as a country, made at one point” to address climate change, Gov. Gretchen Whitmer of Michigan said when she announced that her state would join the alliance and establish a new office of climate and energy.

States can only do so much to tackle global warming by themselves. But they can serve as laboratories of sorts, testing which climate policies work well and which ones are ineffective or too costly. And, by advancing technologies like wind, solar or electric vehicles, they could pave the way for more ambitious federal action — should that moment ever arrive.

Here are some of the biggest steps states have taken recently on climate policy.

More wind and solar power

For years, the go-to climate move for states has been to require utilities to use more renewable electricity, a task made easier by the rapid decline in costs for wind and solar power. Governors are now poised to accelerate those policies.

In Maine, the new governor, Janet Mills, a Democrat, has vowed to restore incentives for rooftop solar and to boost wind power locally — moves that had been stymied by her Republican predecessor.

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In New Mexico, another Democrat, Gov. Michelle Lujan Grisham, is backing a bill requiring electric utilities to get 50 percent of their power from renewable sources by 2030, keeping pace with neighbors like Colorado and Nevada. (Nevada voters in November approved their own requirement for 50 percent renewables by 2030.)

The most striking development, though, has been the array of governors who are now floating plans for their states to get 100 percent of their electricity from zero-carbon sources. Legislators in California and Hawaii have already set deadlines for utilities to meet this target by 2045. In recent months, the governors of Colorado, Illinois, New Jersey and New York have pledged to pursue similar goals.

These states are all venturing into uncharted territory, and there's no guarantee they will succeed. As states rely on ever-larger amounts of wind and solar power, it becomes more challenging to juggle these intermittent sources. Getting all the way to 100 percent zero-carbon electricity, experts say, could require extensive new nationwide transmission lines, novel energy storage techniques or help from untested technologies like advanced nuclear power.

For now, states are experimenting with varied approaches. Hawaii, for example, wants to meet its goal entirely through renewable energy. In New Jersey, by contrast, Gov. Philip D. Murphy signed legislation to keep his state's nuclear plants open as part of a broader low-carbon portfolio. And New York is soliciting bids for large new offshore wind farms.

Cutting pollution from cars

Electricity is responsible for about one-third of America's carbon dioxide emissions. To go further, states will also have to clean up the cars and trucks on their roads, which account for another third.

In December, nine Eastern states and the District of Columbia announced they would work together to put a price on emissions from transportation fuels and invest the revenue in lower-carbon solutions, potentially including mass transit, electric buses or new charging stations to make it easier for people to own plug-in vehicles.

Some of the states involved, like Pennsylvania and Maryland, are in danger of missing their self-imposed climate goals unless they can halt the stubborn rise in driving emissions.

While the finer details of the policy will be hashed out this year, the states are modeling their efforts after the Regional Greenhouse Gas Initiative, a cap-and-trade system in the Northeast that auctions a steadily dwindling supply of carbon pollution permits to power plants and uses the revenue to invest in efficiency and clean energy programs.

"Transportation is going to be even more complex than electricity — there are so many moving parts," said Vicki Arroyo, the executive director of the Georgetown Climate Center, which has been working closely with the states on the initiative. But, she said, referring to Maryland, Massachusetts and Vermont, "It's notable that we have three Republican governors here who are committed to stepping up on this."

More carbon pricing

In November, voters in Washington State rejected a ballot initiative to impose a statewide tax on carbon emissions — a sign that putting a price on carbon, a favorite solution of many economists, remains a tough sell politically.

But the idea is far from dead: In neighboring Oregon, the Legislature is now considering a statewide cap-and-trade system that would put a price on emissions from a wide range of polluters, including manufacturers, paper mills, refineries and utilities. (Oregon already gets the vast majority of its electricity from hydropower dams, so it has less room to expand renewable power than other states.) The bill faces a tough battle, but if it were to pass, Oregon could link up with California and Quebec to create a carbon trading system.

Elsewhere, New Jersey and Virginia are planning to join the Regional Greenhouse Gas Initiative. Although Virginia's governor, Ralph Northam, a Democrat, has faced intense pressure to resign over a racist yearbook photo, state regulators are still laying the groundwork to participate in the cap-and-trade program.

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How far can states go?

In September, a report by America's Pledge, a coalition of states, cities and businesses that have promised to stick with the Paris Agreement, found that current state and city climate policies would, if followed through, get the United States about two-thirds of the way toward its commitment under the accord.

Nathan Hultman, an author of that report and director of the Center for Global Sustainability at the University of Maryland, said the flurry of new state policies could help push the United States closer to its Paris goal, a reduction of emissions at least 26 percent below 2005 levels by 2025, though it would take time to gauge their full impact.

"It's still the case that federal leadership is going to be absolutely essential, and right now that's absent," he said. "But we also knew that federal action alone wasn't going to be enough, because so many important decisions have to be made at the state and city level. And one thing we've seen in the past two years is that states are starting to think seriously about what more they can actually do to deliver real and meaningful emissions reductions."

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PHOTO: Gov. Gretchen Whitmer of Michigan is establishing an office of climate and energy. (PHOTOGRAPH BY Jake May/The Flint Journal, via Associated Press FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES)

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